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TO RUEHC/SESTATE WASHDC 8073  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
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SENSITIVE

BAGHDAD FOR AMBASSADOR ERELI

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SUBJECT: SHI'A CELEBRATE BIRTH OF THE TWELFTH IMAM

REF: MANAMA 49

11. (SBU) Summary: Bahrain's Shi'a population staged their largest-ever celebration of the birth of the twelfth Imam. The festivities were orderly. End summary.

12. (U) Bahrain's Shi'a, known for their large annual Ashura mourning processions, have begun to emphasize happier holidays over the last several years. Of these celebrations, Nasaf Al Sha'abeen, the birthday of Muhammad al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, is the most important.

13. (SBU) Shi'a from Bahrain and from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province converged on central Manama on August 16 in what was, according to contacts in the Shi'a community, the largest celebration of Nasaf Al Sha'aban in Bahrain to date. Local dailies reported that over 7,000 people attended the event. Matams (Shi'a community guilds) and Manama families set up tables and offered sweets and sandwiches to the attendees. Children, bearing sacks, knocked on doors and were given candy and change. Teenagers showered passers-by with rosewater. Shops stayed open late and played loud, upbeat music. In a new addition to this year's celebrations, the Bin Rajab family blocked off a street and created a children's play area, complete with moon bounce. Unlike Ashura, there were very few signs of sectarianism. Poloff noticed only one politically-themed sign, and there were none of the folding tables laden with political pamphlets so common at Ashura. A small police presence on the outskirts of the celebration area focused on traffic management, and didn't interfere in the festivities.

14. (U) Many villages also marked the occasion. Jidhafs, best known for its frequent anti-government protests, hosted a large and orderly festival for Nasaf Al Sha'aban on August 19. The large black and green flags on display in Jidhafs for most of the year were temporarily replaced with festive banners.

15. (SBU) Comment: Eight years into King Hamad's political liberalization, Bahrain's Shi'a continue to grow more confident in expressing their identity.

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